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THE JAWS of THE DRAGON

IN MY LIBRARY ARE MACABRE ACCOUNTS OF VAMPIRES AND WEREWOLVES AND NAMELESS HORRORS THAT CREEP AND CRAWL IN THE NIGHT. MANY ACCOUNTS, ESPECIALLY THE MYTHS AND LEGENDS FROM THE FAR EAST, CONCERN THAT IMAGINARY MONSTER CALLED A DRAGON!

BUT IS THE DRAGON A MYTH? IN A REMOTE JUNGLE VILLAGE, DEEP IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, A TEMPLE WAS ERECTED CENTURIES AGO... DEVOUT MONKS DWELT HERE... GUARDING THE GOLDEN BUDDHAAND THE GIFTS THE PEOPLE HAD BROUGHT TO THE TEMPLE! THERE WAS A LEGEND... THE SACRED DRAGON WOULD DEVOUR ANY INTRUDER WHO DARED TO INTRUDE!

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HAUNTED

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nomscans

THE ELDEST MONK WHO PRESERVED THIS TEMPLE ALONE KNEW THE TRUTH OR FALSITY OF THE LEGEND...

AT A SMALL RIVER PORT WHERE NATIVE BOATS BROUGHT IN FISH AND PEARL DIVERS DOCKED, A BLACK HULLED SCHOONER WAS TIED UP. THERE WHERE NO POLICE IN THE RIVER VILLAGE... AND CAPTAIN MILES KENTON DID AS HE PLEASED!

RAMI SAID THERE'S GOLD AND RUBIES IN THE TEMPLE OF 1000 DRAGONS THEN HE GOT SQUEAMISH!

YIRPA... *YOU* CAME FROM A TOWN NEAR HERE! *YOU* TAKE ME TO THE TEMPLE!

WELL, YIRPA? WILL YOU GUIDE US TO THE TEMPLE? I'LL GIVE YOU RAMI'S SHARE OF THE LOOT IF YOU DO.

I SHOW, SAHIB CAPTAIN. NOT SHOOT YIRPA.

THE VILLAGERS HEARD MILES KENTON'S ORDERS AS HE LED THEM ALONG THE NARROW PATH THAT LED TO THE SACRED TEMPLE.

LET'S GO! IT'LL TAKE ONE DAY TO GET THERE AND ONE DAY TO RETURN!

WE USE FOREIGN DEVIL'S SHIP... HIM NOT COME BACK!

AS THEY NEARED THE TEMPLE OF 1000 DRAGONS, THEY HEARD THE EERIE MUSIC OF FLUTES AND CHIMES... THEN THE SING-SONG CHANT OF THE MONKS AT PRAYER!

THERE IT IS... WE'LL ALL BE RICH IN A LITTLE WHILE!

NO, SAHIB CAPTAIN! SACRED MONKS SING SPECIAL PRAYER.

THEY MAKE PRAYER AGAINST EVIL PERSON, VERY STRONG PRAYER.

YOU IDIOT! I HAVE *SIX* PRAYERS AGAINST *THEM*... RIGHT HERE IN THIS PISTOL!

BEAT HIS BRAINS OUT, SKIPPER!

WHAP

GO ON... *CUT* THAT STUPID STRING!

NO! IS CURSE OF DRAGON!

THIS IS THE CURSE OF KENTON, DUMMY

PATH'S CLEAR, SKIPPER!

COME ON LADS... THERE'S GOLD AND JEWELS INSIDE!

NO! DO NOT DEFILE THIS SACRED TEMPLE!

LEMME HAVE HIM, SKIPPER!

COME ON... THAT GONG MUST BE A SIGNAL TO THE NATIVES!

GONG

GO BACK!

THAT PIG-STICKER WON'T STOP US!

THAT'S IT, SKIPPER! COME ON!

COME ON!

CONTINUED AFTER FOLLOWING PAGE

CHILDISH NONSENSE! FOLLOW ME!

GO SLOW, SKIPPER!

RRAAARGHH

KENTON, DRIVEN BY GREED, LED THEM THROUGH THIS PASSAGE-WAY AND...

THERE MUST BE HUNDREDS OF POUNDS OF PURE GOLD COVERING THAT BUDDHA! GET UP THERE AND START RIPPING IT OFF!

IF YOU WISH TO LIVE, TURN AROUND AND RETURN TO YOUR SHIP! ONLY DEATH AWAITS YOU HERE!

YOU CAN'T STOP US... NO ONE CAN!

YOU ARE IGNORANT, BARBAROUS THIEVES ...YOU DESERVE WHAT-EVER HAPPENS BUT I GIVE YOU FINAL WARNING... TURN BACK!

GOT HIM!

BLAM

THEY STARTED ACROSS THE FLOOR...AS THEY NEARED THE CENTER, KENTON FELT THE FLOOR MOVE BENEATH HIS FEET...THEN IT BEGAN TO TILT...

SKIPPER, WE...

YEEEAAGGHH

AAARRGHH

THEY REFUSED TO HEED MY WARNING...THEY CHOSE THEIR OWN HORRIBLE FATE!

AARRGH

EEE!!!

THESE DRAGONS WERE THE DESCENDANTS OF THE LARGEST CARNIVOROUS LIZARDS IN THE WORLD... CALLED THE DRAGONS OF KOMODO...BUT THESE HAD BEEN BRED FOR SIZE AND VICIOUSNESS...THEY WERE TRULY MORE HIDEOUS THAN THE LEGENDARY DRAGONS!

END

THE OWNER OF FERGUSON'S FIRE CAVERNS HAD GIVEN NAMES TO EACH OF THE GREAT CAVES ELLEN JEAN MATTHEWS ESCORTED THE TOURIST GROUPS THROUGH ...THIS ONE WAS CALLED 'THE ROOM OF THE FIRE MONSTER', AND ELLEN JEAN TOLD THEM WHY...

TEMPLE OF FIRE

AND THIS IS CALLED THE ROOM OF THE FIRE MONSTER BECAUSE ON AT LEAST TWO OCCASIONS, A STRANGE, DEMONIC FORM WAS GLIMPSED HERE...

SCRIPT: JOE GILL

DO THESE CAVES REALLY FILL UP WITH FIRE SOMETIMES?

YES, BUT MR. FERGUSON KNOWS WHEN THIS WILL HAPPEN AND HE SEALS THE CAVE 'TIL THE FLAMES SUBSIDE.

UH-OH! THERE'S THE FIRST WARNING! MR. FERGUSON WANTS THE CAVES CLEARED!

IN TEN MINUTES, THE TWO GUIDES WITH TOURIST GROUPS HAD TAKEN THEM OUTSIDE THEN MET WITH GEORGE FERGUSON ...

HOW DO YOU KNOW THERE'LL BE FIRES, MR. FERGUSON?

THERMOMETERS...IN THE DEEPEST HOLES IN THE CAVE!

THE FIRE'S ROARING UP A VENT NOW! A THOUSAND FEET DEEP!

TEMPERATURE

BUT IT'LL REACH THE CAVES IN A FEW MINUTES!

I GET NERVOUS DOWN THERE SOMETIMES, ELLEN ... AS IF SOMEONE'S WATCHING!

STOP IT, JIM ... YOU'LL SPOOK ME SO I CAN'T KEEP WORKING AND I NEED THE JOB FOR FALL TUITION!

NEXT DAY JIM ALDEN TOOK SIX PEOPLE DOWN. HALFWAY THROUGH THE TOUR, HE SUDDENLY FOUND HE ONLY HAD FIVE...

WHERE'S THE OTHER GUY WHO WAS TAKING PICTURES?

I SAW HIM GOING DOWN THAT PASSAGE FIXING HIS CAMERA ...

N-NO,... PLEASE...

YAAAKKHHH!

MISTER... WHERE ARE YOU?

THEN JIM ALDEN SAW IT... HIDEOUS, BESTIAL... CROUCHED OVER THE FALLEN MAN ...

GET AWAY FROM HIM!

GET BACK!

HE PASSED OUT! MAYBE HE HAD A HEART ATTACK.

PLEASE GO UP AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN!

THE ALARM SOUNDED, JIM! WHAT HAP-PENED TO HIM?

EXIT

SOME KIND OF...MONSTER ATTACKED HIM! I SLUGGED HIM WITH MY TORCH! IS EVERYONE OUT?

I'LL CHECK, JIM! YOU GO ON AHEAD...

ELLEN JEAN WENT QUICKLY. THE ALARM SOUNDED AND THE FLAMES WERE COMING SO SHE TURNED AND STARTED TO RUN!

KAW

I WAITED TOO LONG!

I'M GOING TO MAKE IT!

AAAGRRRRRR

CONTINUED AFTER FOLLOWING PAGE

OH NO!!

AAARRRGGHH!

ELLEN JEAN FELT THE HEAT... IT BROUGHT HER BACK TO CONSCIOUSNESS... AND THEN SHE SAW THE HIDEOUS CREATURE THAT HAD HER!

HE'S GOING INTO THE FIRE!

WHERE'S HE TAKING ME AND

MY GOD!

THERE ARE OTHERS!!

THEN SHE WAS IN A CAVERN SO HOT THAT HER LUNGS BURNED WHEN SHE BREATHED!

I'LL DIE SOON... FROM THE HEAT... IF THEY DON'T KILL ME SOME OTHER WAY!

AS FERGUSON READ THE THERMOMETER, HE SWUNG SHUT THE HEAVY IRON DOOR!

FLAMES COMING...GOT TO SEAL THE CAVE!

YOU CAN'T! ELLEN JEAN IS STILL IN THERE! I'M GOING AFTER HER!

IF I FIND ELLEN, I'LL GET HER OUT!

HE FOUND HER...IN THE SUPERHEATED CAVE, BESET BY THE FOUL CREATURES! JIM ALDEN HAD GRABBED THE CARBON-DIOXIDE FIRE EXTINGUISHER ON A HUNCH! NOW HE TURNED THE FREEZING GAS ON THE NEAREST FIRE CREATURES AND...

AAARRRGG!

SSSSSSS!

IT WORKS! THEY TURN WHITE WHERE THE CO^2 HITS THEM!

I REACHED HER JUST IN TIME...

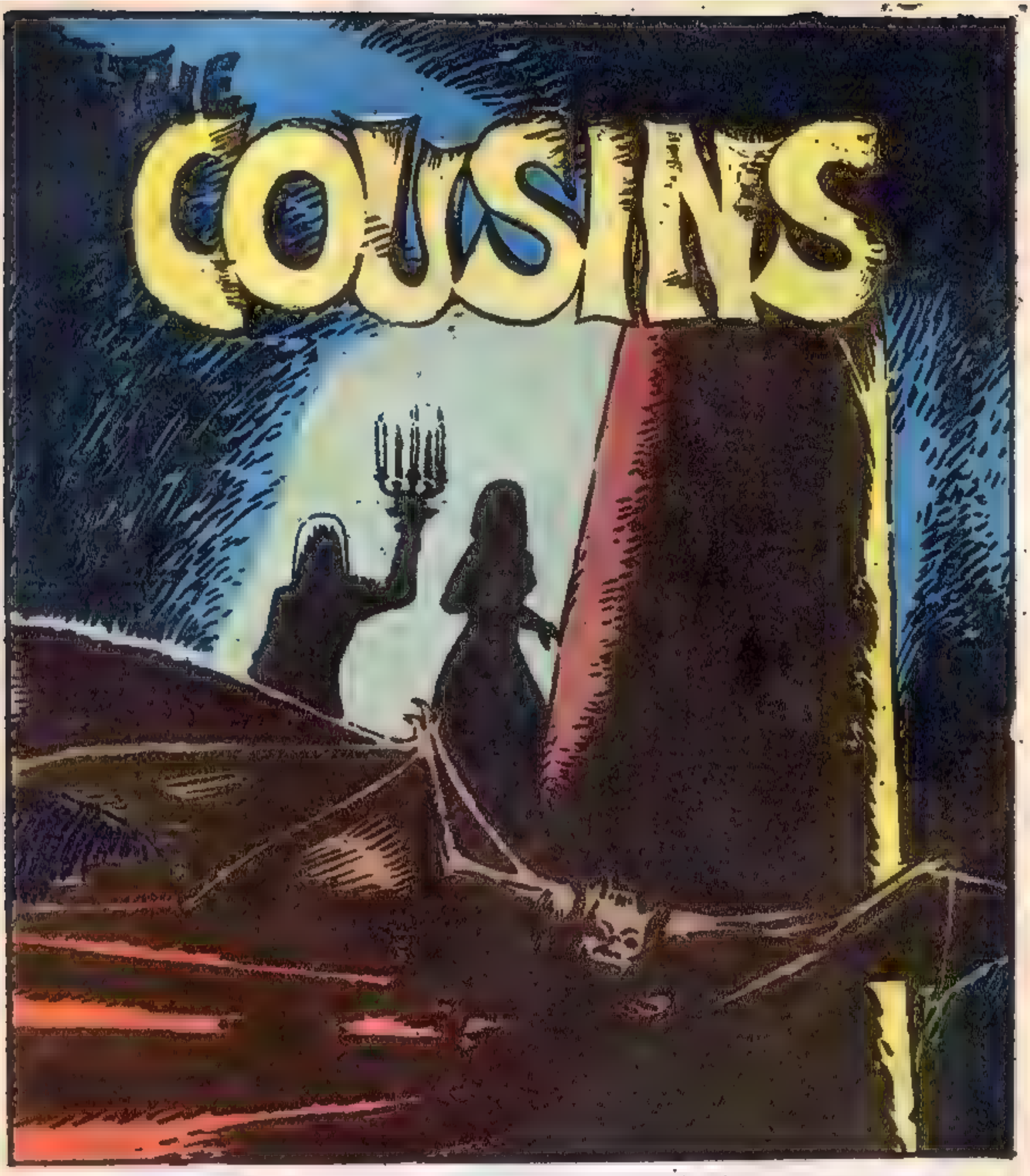
POLICE WERE AT THE ENTRANCE WHEN JIM ALDEN GOT THERE WITH THE GIRL! FERGUSON'S FIRE CAVES WERE CLOSED INDEFINITELY!

WILL WE EVER KNOW WHAT THEY ARE, JIM?

PERHAPS IT'S BEST IF WE DON'T ELLEN!

...SONS FIRE CAVES

END



The invitation bore the postmark of a Middle European nation. Garry Hilguth used his butter knife to slit open the envelope at the breakfast table on the terrace. The Hilguth home was perched on the steep slope of an arroyo in California, far, far away from the Balkans and the Balkan ways.

His lovely, dark-haired wife looked questioningly at her forty-ish husband as he perused the thin parchment. Garry began to smile.

"What is it, darling?" Lucia asked. "An invitation to hunt in Brazil again? Or is it from Nepal, from those kooks who claim to talk with the yeti regularly?"

Garry laughed, handing the single-page letter across to his splendidly constructed wife. "Neither. It's from a cousin I've never heard of. Yorgi Klopotkin, *Count* Yorgi Klopotkin, in the Balkans. He is inviting us to spend the summer at his castle."

His wife eagerly seized the letter and scanned. As she finished, their daughter joined them at the table. Nadia Hilguth looked like her mother, only younger and even lovelier.

"We're not going to the Haitian voodoo carnival after all, darling," Lucia told her daughter. "Your father and I just decided we'll go to Europe this summer. You'll adore Cousin Yorgi's castle."

An obedient daughter, Nadia smiled back, honestly delighted.

"Really, mother? I'm so glad. That's where it all began, isn't it?"

Garry nodded at his daughter. "It will refresh our

memories, honey. We must never forget our heritage."

On the Balkan crag where Count Yorgi Klopotkin stubbornly went on living in his crumbling, uncomfortable castle, the Count plucked eagerly at the only letter he had received in years. Naturally, it was from Garry Hilguth accepting Cousin Yorgi's invitation.

"Wonnerful, wonnerful," the Count snarled, lisping a little because he was drooling at the thought of three guests entering his cozy, little castle. "I shall instruct the servants to ready their quarters."

He frowned momentarily. "Drat! The servants left, hundreds of years ago. Those of them still able to walk, of course."

He drooled some more, thinking of Those Golden Years, then went to the eroded stone railing of the balcony where he sat and glared at the tiny village nestling in the valley in the distance. His long, dreadfully pale, nearly bloodless, face contorted with hatred and when he smiled, his teeth were unnaturally long and pointy.

In case you haven't guessed, Count Yorgi Kropotkin was *a vampire!* "They'll arrive tonight, the letter said," Yorgi murmured silkily. "I shall try to find some decent wines in the wine cellar. I wish to make them feel at home ... they will need sustenance too if they are to remain well-fed and palatable."

Count Yorgi sent a message by a bumbling peasant. Groceries were dispatched to the castle and left at the crumbling gates later in the day.

It was dark, and a pale moon was rising when the rented car scraped and bumped over the rutted castle road and entered the courtyard. Count Yorgi observed their arrival, flapping over their car, unseen of course. Yorgi at the moment was *a bat.* (A form vampires often adopt).

The three alighted and started toward the torchlit castle entrance. As they climbed the steps, Count Yorgi opened the heavy door.

"Welcome, Cousins," he said, his voice unpleasant but he tried to sound hospitable. "Come inside. You must be tired from your journey."

The Hilguth family toasted Count Yorgi, and the nobleman toasted them. It was a really sweet family reunion. So sweet, it worried their daughter, Nadia.

"He's such a sweet old guy, Mother," Nadia complained later, in their dust-laden, spider-webbed suite. "Are you sure he's one of *them?*"

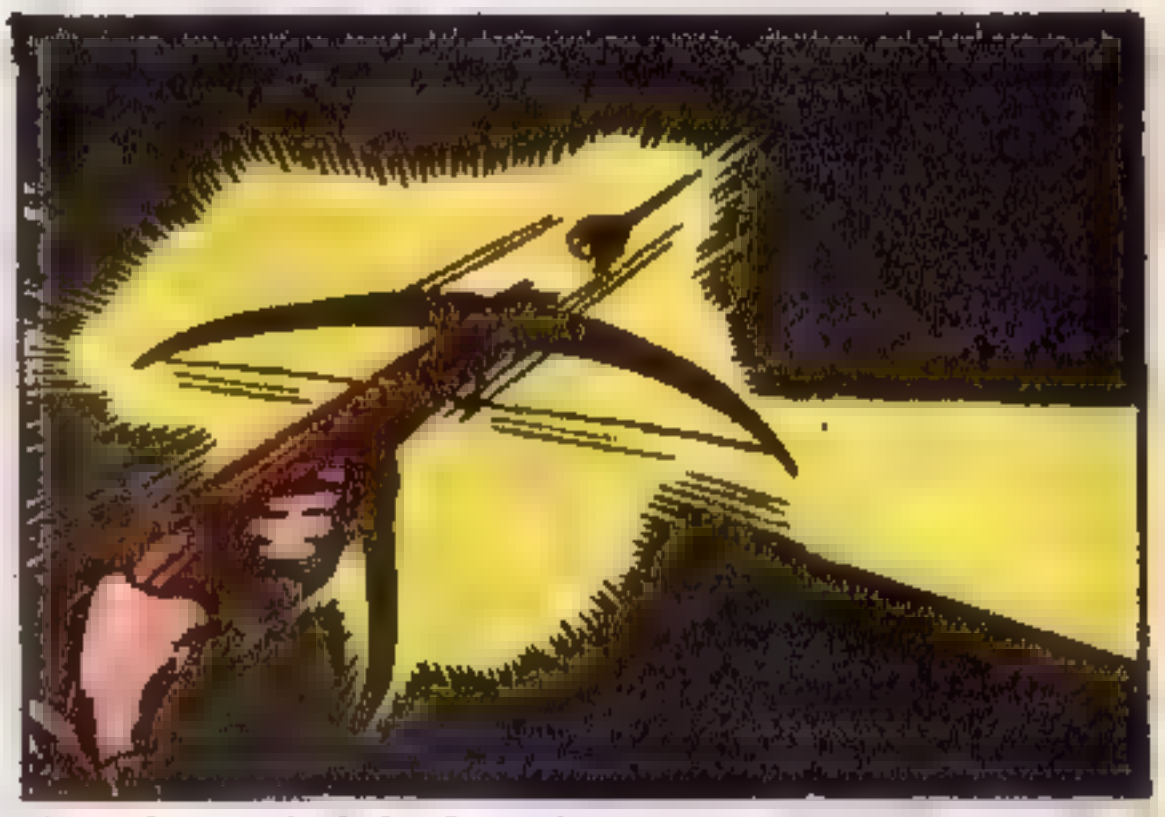
Lucia Hilguth smiled fondly at her daughter. In the background, Garry Hilguth was busy with his strange, ancient weapon.

"Of course, my dear," she replied. "Now, be patient. In a few minutes, we'll go to the cellar. Cousin Yorgi will be flitting around, I'm sure."

Garry Hilguth had strung his ancient cross-bow. Nadia, an expert bowman, strung her bow, and Lucia just went along to keep score as the three hurried down the stairs.

"We've destroyed werewolves, banished ghosts from ancestral castles, in fact we've successfully hunted everything but never have we bagged a vampire in bat form. This is *a real challenge!*"

To the cellars! Garry had his crossbow, Nadia her expert's bow and arrows, and Nadia her lust for death as



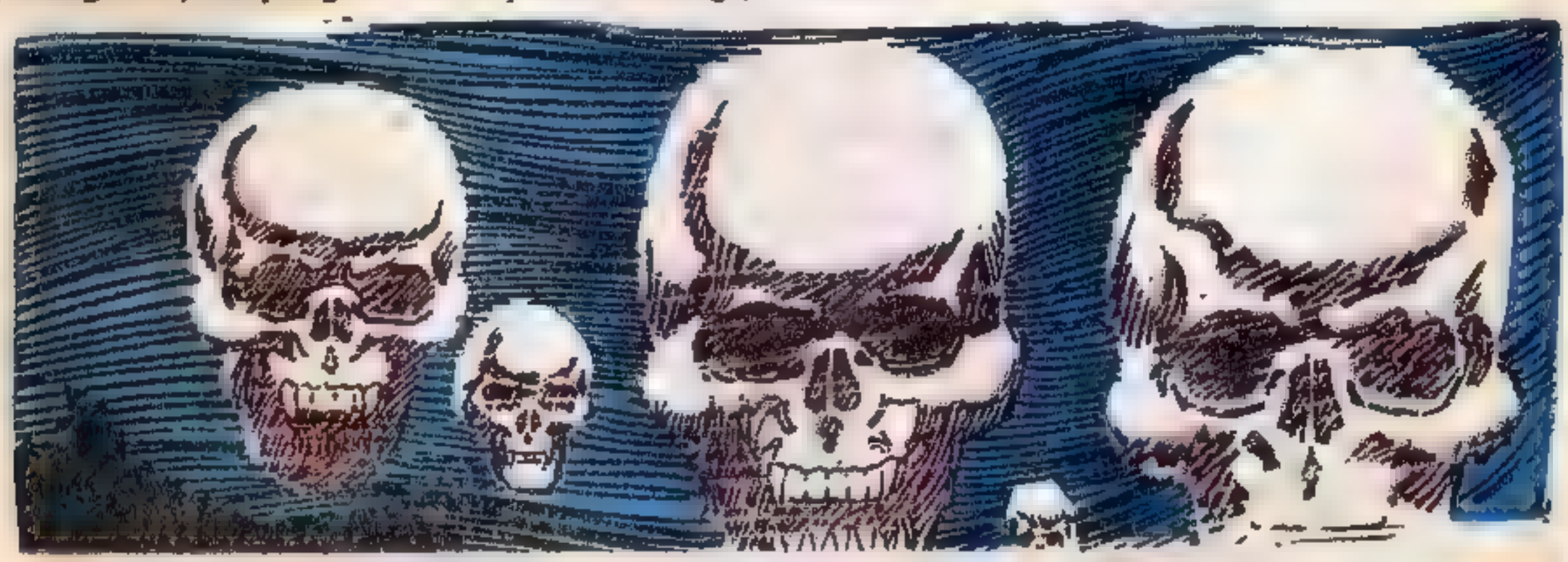
they descended the bread stone stairs. The great bat, flying, squeaking, around the ancient cellars spied them and spiraled down, seeking a victim.

"Your shot, my dear," Garry said gallantly to his daughter. She notched an arrow, aimed swiftly, and loosed a bolt. It nicked the bat slightly but Count Yorgi didn't care. He went for Nadia. Garry had his crossbow sighted and he loosed his quarrel (crossbow) at the predator. It struck.

Count Yorgi died. At last, after four hundred and ten years. The vampire expired with a wooden shaft in his heart. The Hilguth family looked in triumph at each other. They had achieved the ultimate triumph.

At that moment, stones trembled. The Mountain quaked. And the Count's castle tumbled down on the trio in the cellar. Ten thousand tons buried them deep. In the village, one man looked at another, then they smiled.

"The vampire is dead. It was foretold, when the last of them died, the castle would fall." Their terror had ended.



THE WHISPERING BOX

SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS, 1692, EDWIN GRUBB SCANS THE BLACK WHARF IMPATIENTLY. UNDER AN IRON GREY SKY A SINGLE VESSEL ROCKS UNEASILY, TETHERED AT THE EDGE OF THE DARK SEA, THE LAST OF ITS CARGO UNLOADED.

SURELY THAT IS HIM, *ISMENO*, SERVANT OF MY LATE UNCLE MARTIN, FAITHFUL EVEN AFTER DEATH.

HO! OLD MAN! BE YE THE SERVANT CALLED ISMENO OF THE HOUSE OF GRUBB?

MAY ALLAH SHIELD YOU FROM THE SHROUDED THINGS OF THE NIGHT. INDEED I AM CALLED ISMENO FORMERLY OF THE HOUSE OF SAHIB MARTIN GRUBB HONORED SIR.

I AM EDWIN GRUBB IT SEEMS I HAVE INHERITED YOUR HEATHEN SELF ALONG WITH THE REST OF UNCLE MARTINS' USELESS TRIVIA.

D7414

NO!

THIS HAS BEEN ENTRUSTED TO MY CARE ALONE. I COULD NOT BURDEN ANOTHER WITH IT!

THEN CARRY YOUR OWN BOX OLD ONE AND THE DEVIL WITH YOU!

THUS IT WAS THAT RAYMOND AND HIS ODD CARVEN BOX, THE IRON BOUND BOX, CAME TO THE SALEM HOUSE OF GRUBB

DWIN'S CURIOSITY OF THE BOX AND THE MYSTERY SURROUNDING IT ATTRACTED HIM...

MASTER, YOUR THOUGHTS CONFUSE THIS OLD HEAD!

WHISPER YOUR COMMAND ONCE MORE...

NO! YOU CAN'T MEAN THAT, MASTER!

IS THE OLD ONE MAD OR IS THIS SOME SCHEME OF WITCHERY BY MY MYSTERIOUS UNCLE'S HAND.

HE WHOSE PORTRAIT HANGS UPON MY WALL WAS RUMORED TO BE A MIGHTY WARLOCK IN EUROPE!

DO YOU LIVE ON, UNCLE, ENCASED IN YOUR OWN IRON BOUND BOX!

FOOLS! YOU CAN NEVER KILL ME!

THEN YOU'LL LIVE ON MINUS A HEAD, WITCH!

CONDEMNED IN PARIS BY HIS OWN BLASPHEMOUS TESTIMONY, MARTIN GRUBB WAS PUT TO DEATH FOR WITCHCRAFT!

2

CONTINUED AFTER THE NEXT TWO PAGES

HEEDING HIS WORDS, THE MAGISTRATE HAD THE HEAD SET ASIDE FOR BURNING LATER.

IT WAS THEN THAT THE FAITHFUL ISMENO STOLE IT AWAY.

SO MUCH FOR THE STRANGE STORY OF MY UNCLE... BUT IS IT NOT PERHAPS MORE THAN A STORY? IF THAT BOX CONTAINS WHAT I BELIEVE IT DOES, GREAT POWER RESIDES BENEATH MY ROOF!

AND THAT POWER WILL SOON BE *MINE!*

IT IS *TRUE* THEN, MASTER? EH? YES... *YES!* THANK YOU, MASTER!

THANK YOU!

THE HEAD OF MY UNCLE... THE HEAD OF *MARTIN GRUBB* LIVES IN THAT BOX DOESN'T IT, ISMENO? YOUR DAYS ARE AT AN END, TELL ME TRUELY!

THANK..YOU...

A THOUSAND THANKS, YOUNG MASTER GRUB, {GASP} YOU HAVE RELIEVED ME OF A DREADFUL BURDEN, {CHOKE} ...NOW IT IS *YOURS!*

THE THRASHING WAVES EAGERLY DEVOURED ISMENO'S AGED REMAINS!

BUT WHEN EDWIN ATTEMPTED TO BREAK OPEN THE BOX...

THE PRY BAR IS WRENCHED FROM MY HANDS!

PUT IT DOWN, EDWIN!

NOW, PLACE ME ON THE MANTLE BESIDE MY PORTRAIT. IT IS ENOUGH FOR YOU TO SEE WHAT I LOOKED LIKE IN LIFE!

NOW HERE IS WHAT I WOULD HAVE YOU DO...

I HEED YOUR WORD, UNCLE!

YOU WILL VISIT DAME OLCUT TONIGHT AS IT IS YOUR HABIT ONLY HENCEFORTH IN YOUR COURTSHIP I SHALL ATTEND YOUR EVERY TRYST!

IT IS A SECRET BOX OF STRANGE AND OBSCURE ORIGINS, MARY. BUT LISTEN AND YE SHALL HEAR IT WHISPER TO YOU!

AND WHAT SHALL IT WHISPER TO ME, EDWIN?

HEAR IT NOT, MARY? IT SPEAKS OF OUR FUTURE... OF GREAT POWERS TO AID US IN OUR LIFE TOGETHER!

YES, YES! OUR LIFE TOGETHER!

OHHH! YES, EDWIN! WE MUST BE TOGETHER NO MATTER WHAT! I AM YOURS!

THE ROMANCE BETWEEN EDWIN, MARY AND THE WHISPERING BOX TOOK ON A CERTAIN MACABRE INTENSITY.

GRADUALLY EDWIN UNFOLDED THE PLAN TOLD HIM BY THE WONDEROUS WHISPERING BOX.

IT WILL BE EXACTLY AS YOU SAY, EDWIN MY LOVE.

NAY, NOT MY WORDS, WOMAN... HIS, THE BOX!

AND IT CAME TO PASS A DAY LATER THAT THE VERY REVEREND MR PINGREE OCCASIONED TO CALL AT MARY OLCUT'S COTTAGE.

DAME OLCUT, I RECEIVED WORD YOU WERE IN SOME DISTRESS MAY I BE OF SERVICE?

YOU WERE MISINFORMED, DEAR REVEREND...

AS YOU CAN PLAINLY SEE, I'M IN EXCELLENT HEALTH!

THERE IS ONE HERE, THOUGH WHO WOULD LIKE A WORD WITH YOU.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE BOX BOTH THE MAN OF GOD AND A WEALTHY MERCHANT CONFESSED TO BEING WITCHES. THE MERCHANT HAD PREVIOUSLY SIGNED OVER HIS ENTIRE WEALTH TO EDWIN GRUBB

THE VERY HOLY MR. PINGREE HAS DECLARED ME THE TRUE LEADER OF SALEM! HEH!

AND THE UNFORTUNATE MERCHANT, SIGNED OVER HIS FORTUNE TO YOU BEFORE CONFESSING WITCHCRAFT! HA HA!

IT WAS NOT LONG BEFORE OTHERS FROM WHOM SOME POWER OR WEALTH COULD BE OBTAINED WERE CONFESSING TO WITCH-CRAFT AND TAKEN OFF TO THE BURNING TREE... MUCH TO EDWIN GRUBB'S PROFIT!

THE FLAMES TURN THE NIGHT SKY RED. INDEED OUR POWER IS FEARSOME, EDWIN.

FOOLISH WOMAN! 'TIS NOT OUR DOING

...IT IS THE BOX!

OF COURSE, *UNCLE MARTIN* HIS EVIL SOUL DIRECTS OUR COURSE.

INDEED, YES... YET JUST THINK OF THE POWER TO BE GAINED BY A MORE *DIRECT* CONFRONTATION WITH UNCLE MARTIN!

WHAT ARE YOU *SAYING*, EDWIN?

THE WHISPERING BOX CONTAINS THE VERY SOURCE OF EVIL POWER... AND I MEAN TO *POSSESS* IT!

TCH-TCH! HAVE YOU SO SOON FORGOTTEN THE FUTILITY OF YOUR LAST ATTEMPT TO UNLOCK THE EVIL WITHIN, EDWIN?

HEAR HIM, MARY. THE OLD WARLOCK MOCKS ME!

HA HAHAHEE HA HEE!

SILENCE FOOL! I WILL TOLERATE NO MORE MEDDLING!

YOURS IS NOT TO QUESTION THE POWER ...YOU ARE SIMPLY TO OBEY, *OBEY!*

OBEY!

I PROMISE TO BE YOUR FAITHFUL SERVANT. BUT GIVE ME KNOWLEDGE OF THE SPELLS, CHARMS AND DARK RITUALS REQUIRED AND I WILL BRING ALL SALEM... NAY ALL *THE WORLD* TO YOUR FEET!

PRAY TELL ME WHAT HE SAYS, EDWIN?

YES, UNCLE, I HEAR AND OBEY. THE SECRET CURSE OF THE *BLUE DEMON*?

YES, YES!

NOW... THE SECRET OF THE SERPENT THAT SETS MAN AGAINST MAN?

THE ANCIENT CURSES WERE BROUGHT TO BEAR ON A COMMUNITY ALREADY... SHAKEN WITH FEAR.

AND EDWIN GRUBB SEEMED TO BE EVERY-WHERE AT ONCE AND IN HIS PASSING SHADOW EVERY MAN TURNED ON HIS NEIGHBOR!

HELP, THE VERY HOUSE HAS TURNED UPON ME!

FAITH! TIS DOUBT-LESS THE WORK OF A WITCH!

...!ENOS VERATIM N' TBL TAKN! *HEH!* NOW THEY WILL ALL BE AT EACH OTHER'S THROATS!

AND AS EACH BLEAK FEARFUL DAY PASSED...

MASTER GRUBB ARE WE NEVER TO BE RID OF THESE CURSED WITCHES!

ONE MUST BE EVER WATCHFUL, OLD WOMAN!

AND ONCE THE EVIL ONES ARE FOUND OUT THEY MUST BURN... *BURN! BURN! HEH HEH!*

PASSING THE SMOLDERING BURNING TREE EDWIN THOUGHT AGAIN OF THE SEEMINGLY LIMITLESS POWERS CONTAINED IN THE WHISPERING BOX.

WE REIGN LIKE A KING AND QUEEN OVER SALEM! YET YOU SEEM UNFULFILLED IN YOUR TRIUMPH?

I MEAN TO HAVE SECRETS UNCLE MARTIN ALONE KNOWS!

I MEAN TO KNOW THE SECRET OF THE *WHISPERING BOX!*

THE INSTANT EDWIN SET HANDS ON THE IRON BOUND BOX THE HIDEOUS LAUGH PEALED AGAIN..

HA-HA-HA-

I WARNED YOU *ONCE*, EDWIN, *KEEP AWAY!*

YYYIII!

UNGH!

WHAT HAPPENED? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

THE CURSED THING HAS TURNED AGAINST ME! HEARD YOU NOT IT'S WARNING!?

I...I HEARD NOTHING, EDWIN. NOUGHT BUT YOUR SCREAM AS YOU FELL BACK.

WHAT?

DEAR EDWIN, I *NEVER* HEARD THE WHISPERING BOX SPEAK. I ONLY PRETENDED TO IN ORDER TO BE WITH YOU. FOR US TO BE WITCH AND WARLOCK TOGETHER!

YOU... NEVER... HEARD... IT?

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THE MOCKING LAUGHTER SEEMED TO SHRIEK FROM THE BOX, SCREAMING THROUGH EDWIN GRUBB'S TORTURED MIND...

LIKE THUNDER ROLLING ACROSS BLACK AND BLOOD-RED SKIES OF OLD SALEM.

YOU LIED!

I ONLY WANTED TO BE WITH YOU, DEAR EDWIN!

YOU LIED. NOW YOU HAVE SET THE BOX AGAINST ME!

BAM!

EVEN THE EXPLOSION OF THE PISTOL FAILED TO SHUT OUT THE MOCKING LAUGHTER IN EDWINS HEAD.

THE SHOT WAS HEARD!

THUD! THUD! KNOCK!

SEE WHAT FURTHER TROUBLE YOU HAVE CAUSED, WOMAN?

WE HEARD A GUNSHOT, MASTER GRUBB IS ALL WELL WITHIN?

I AM... I AM UNHARMED...

CLEANING THE PISTOL ... UH...

THE MAD LAUGHTER, CONTINUED IN EDWIN'S MIND.. SURELY THEY HEARD IT... SURELY THEY SUSPECTED!..

UNCLE MARTIN!

WHAT'S THIS? YOU ARE NOT WELL, MASTER GRUBB

STOP! YOU MUST BE QUIET LEST THEY HEAR!

WE HAD BEST GO IN!

N-NO! KEEP OUT!

CALM YOURSELF MASTER GRUBB YOU SOUND LIKE A MAN POSSESSED!

TIS MISTRESS OLCOT. HE'S SHOT HER!

NOT I! YOU DON'T UNDER-STAND!

I THINK WE BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND MUCH!..

...VERY MUCH INDEED MASTER GRUBB

YOU UNDERSTAND NOTHING!

TIS THE WHISPERING BOX TO BLAME FOR ALL!

THE DAMN BOX!

MASTER GRUBB! I FEAR FOR YOUR SANITY AS WELL AS YOUR SOUL!

THIS ANCIENT CONTAINER, IRON BOUND AND FORE-BODING AS IT MAY BE..

SPEECHLESS WITH TERROR, EDWIN GAPED AS THE DOOR OF THE WHISPERING BOX SWUNG OPEN EASILY...

...AND HE AT LAST WAS CON-FRONTED WITH THE ELUSIVE SOURCE OF THE EVIL POWER HE HAD SO DESPERATELY SOUGHT.

HARBORS NOTHING MORE SINISTER THAN AN OLD...

MIRROR!

THE BELIEF IN A SUPERNATURAL SOURCE OF EVIL IS NOT NECES-SARY, MEN ALONE ARE QUITE CAPABLE OF EVERY WICKEDNESS
JOSEPH CONRAD

IT WAS BUT A SHORT WALK TO THE BURNING TREE AND...

THE END